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## THE CRISIS OF ADOLESCENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF RESILIENCE – POSITIVE PREVENTION

### Abstract

This article presents a curious outlook on the phenomenon of identity crisis among young people from the perspective of positive psychology and pedagogy. The subject is significant for the reason that it illustrates the methods of coping with identity crisis which untreated may lead to serious consequences for the individual and their environment. The positive psychology approach can bring a new point of view for social rehabilitation and the preventive measures.

The previous preventative and rehabilitative solutions did not produce any expected results; consequently, rehabilitation remains a utopia. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate new, accurate approaches and forms of interaction. It is hoped that positive psychology which within the last three decades has provided an alternative for the traditional approach focusing on human defects is the answer.

The current achievements of positive psychology appear promising for better diagnosis, understanding and developing the theory of personality disorders, substance abuse, and conflicts. Knowing and focusing on the positive resources of an individual allows to create a theoretical basis enabling a positive prevention.

The state of the art of positive psychology may contribute to the initiation and possibly a shift in perceiving rehabilitation of youth and its outcome, and strengthening faith in people. What is essential is the idea of the transformation of thinking, which can be instilled in a new generation of socially maladjusted youth mentors for it is impossible to rehabilitate effectively without a conviction that actions bring meaning.

**Key word:** a critical transition, adolescence, young people maladjusted, positive prevention

## Kryzys adolescencyjny w kontekście odporności psychicznej – profilaktyka pozytywna Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje spojrzenie psychologii pozytywnej na zjawisko niedostosowania społecznego oraz radzenia sobie w sytuacjach trudnych. Jednym z takich wydarzeń niewątpliwie jest kryzys adolescencji, z którym muszą sobie radzić dorastający ludzie.

Dotychczasowe rozwiązania z zakresu resocjalizacji i profilaktyki wymagają poszukiwania nowych, bardziej trafnych podejść oraz form oddziaływań. Nadzieja tkwi w psychologii pozytywnej, która pozwala w odmienny sposób spojrzeć na młodego człowieka – nie skupia się bowiem na defektach, ale na pozytywnych stronach osobowości człowieka, nazywanych również siłami charakteru.

Aktualny dorobek psychologii pozytywnej pozwala na lepsze diagnozowanie, rozumienie zaburzeń oraz stworzenie podłoża teoretycznego umożliwiającego pozytywną prewencję. Teorie rozwijane w ramach psychologii pozytywnej mogą dostarczyć użytecznych narzędzi do pracy resocjalizacyjnej i psychoedukacyjnej. Pozwala bowiem na opisanie, szerszego niż do tej pory, zakresu funkcjonowania człowieka.

Artykuł podkreśla wartość psychologii pozytywnej oraz możliwości wykorzystania jej dorobku w zakresie pracy resocjalizacyjnej i wychowawczej. Czerpiąc z idei psychologii pozytywnej, możliwe jest zapoczątkowanie, a może i zmiana pojmowania resocjalizacji młodzieży, jej rezultatów oraz wzmocnienie wiary w człowieka. Niezwykle istotna jest idea transformacji kierunku myślenia, która może być zaszczerpiona wśród nowego pokolenia mentorów młodzieży niedostosowanej społecznie. Niemożliwa jest bowiem skuteczna resocjalizacja bez przeświadczenia, iż podejmowane działania mają sens.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kryzys adolescencji, tożsamość, młodzież niedostosowana społecznie, pozytywna prewencja, psychologia pozytywna

## Introduction

Adolescence is a specific stage in life of every human being when young people commence to look for their own identity and try to answer the question: “who am I?,” and a time of intense biological, psychological and sociological changes. The way of dealing with identity crisis depends on many factors, including the resources of resistant youth. The inability to cope with the crisis may result in dangerous activities (e.g. self-destructive behavior), or socially maladjusted behavior.

Socially maladjusted young people and volunteers represent different ways of coping with the crisis of adolescence. The first category manifests rebellion against the recognized principles, and tries to find its own identity in the group, which confirms their antisocial beliefs. The second one, by engaging in pro-social activities and helping others, realizes themselves and meets the need to feel wanted.

From the perspective of positive psychology, it is worth looking for character strengths, and, on this basis, starting researching preventive and rehabilitative solutions. The concept of resilience has become increasingly popular in educational

sciences, psychology, and biology. Although there is no clear definition of terminology and complexity of the concept, the goal of it seems to be a trend clear to all theorists and practitioners: it is a desire to enhance the properties of the individual in order to facilitate their adaptation despite the difficult life situations.

## The Adolescence: Characteristics

The term “adolescence” originates from the Latin word “adolescere” which literally means grow toward adulthood, and is defined by the psychologists as the “period between childhood and adulthood” (Lendzion, 2006).

In the literature, an additional division of this period into early and late adolescence can be found. In various studies the age range of both stages is not unambiguous; however, for the purpose of this article, I will apply Harwas-Napierała’s (2000) definition that ascribes the period of late adolescence to occur between 16 to 20 years of age. This is unquestionably an exceptionally essential time in life of a young person in which they try to solve the so-called identity crisis that requires making choices between values and ideas important for them (Harwas-Napierała, Trempała, 2000). The period of adolescence is mainly the time of self development during which previously unknown emotional experiences and new ways of intellectual perception of the phenomena shape one’s personality (Harwas-Napierała, Trempała, 2000, p. 167).

The social development in the stage of late adolescence is characterized primarily by building relationships with peers, establishing friendships, and becoming increasingly more aware of the importance of such qualities as loyalty and trust. What is characteristic is also adjusting own opinion to the one of the majority. Studies show that it is a result of the need of acceptance and belonging to a group, not the effect of the inner need to subordinate (Piaget, 2006).

In addition, what falls on the period of adolescence as well is the phase of autonomous morality initially characterized by believing in the necessity of strict compliance with moral principles, regardless of the circumstances. With time, however, young people realize that the power of social situations require flexibility of actions, and therefore shape their own ethics and conscience that belong to the universal principles based on truth, justice, and respect for human laws (Obuchowska, 2004).

Dembo (1997) specifies the period of adolescence as the time of psychosocial moratorium when society condones young people trying diverse identities and failing in those attempts, at the same time protecting them against consequences of their own actions.

Another important issue related to this period is shaping the worldview of young people that is subjected to changes and serves as a tool to overcome life difficulties. It is connected with youthful idealism which can be divided into three main stages: anticipatory idealism (optimistic vision of the future, faith in own abilities), compensatory idealism (criticism of others), and normative idealism (practical distinction between what is achievable and what is not).

## The Crisis of Adolescence

The crisis of adolescence is associated mainly with identity crisis. The main factors that hinder a young man from defining themselves and their relation to the world are primarily the volatility of the world, which means mainly a sense of insecurity or even a threat to the psychological sense of security, and anonymity of the individual (Musiał, 2007). These determinants are the source of tension which consequently significantly reduces the possibility of personal development and adaptation. There is no doubt that this issue is an individual one and different people attempt to look for themselves in various ways; the whole process depends, above all, on the additional factors supporting or impeding dealing with the situation, therefore the protective factors and the risk factors.

The notion of identity is occasionally used interchangeably with terms such as personality, autonomy, or individuality (Drabik, Kubiak-Sokół, Sobol, 2010). The idea of 'identity' has been an interest of the representatives of various sciences, e.g. mathematics, philosophy, psychology or sociology for decades.

From the perspective of this article, what will be the interest of mine are the last two fields in relation to explaining "identity," and more specifically, the issues related to identity crisis, which will be described in more detail below.

In pedagogy and education sciences, identity signifies the way of understanding oneself along with the surrounding world, and is expressed in the form of human activity, professed values, and accepted moral standards (Dziewiecki, 2005). In the era of post-modernity allowing the realization of a variety of lifestyles, as well as the values, it is much more difficult to choose a proper path in life. An individual, particularly at the stage of adolescence, becomes helpless against the current fashion or ideology, and understands less and less about oneself and their place in the world. Marek Dziewiecki (2005) points out that the inability to find one's own way in the world and choosing the wrong way may lead to formation of a "narrow" and "deformed" identity due to which a person establishes abnormal, toxic relationships based on a wrong system of values, e.g. putting tolerance above love. The deformed identity is also based on aspiring to temporary pleasure and the easy pursuit of happiness instead of setting high standards based on own life aspirations (Dziewiecki, 2000). Accordingly, formation of a mature identity stands for the ability to move in the area of freedom and derive positive values of life, and the sense of fulfillment.

In general psychological terms, identity means the relationship to the self and the world (as in the interpretation above) (Kieszkowska, 2011, p. 253); nonetheless, the particular psychological trends interpret this process in a slightly different way. This results from different modes of understanding and recognition of the basic anthropological assumptions, therefore the criteria which are supposed to be used in describing human identity. In the classical behaviorist perspective it is hard to discuss identity of a human controlled by a system of rewards and punishments and other external factors. In the light of social psychology, identity is interpreted as self-consciousness of its own social roles, but also the expectations, or even

pressures posed by the society. Consequently, the process of identity formation is understood as the attempt to fulfill the standards imposed by the society that serves as a guideline on how to act. Parsons (1968), one of the representatives of social psychology, defines cultural system as a set of symbols and rules by which it is possible to effectively shape the behavior and identity of the individuals. Therefore, identity of the individual is the result of participation in social life. Nonetheless, Margaret Mead, a representative of symbolic interactionism, draws attention to the interaction between the individual and the society, and not just one-sided communication. For that reason, a person is an autonomic and aware partner in the interaction with the society, not merely a passive machine fulfilling social expectations. That relationship together with the attitude toward various social expectations influence the process of identity formation. Contemporary social psychology points to the dual nature of identity: individual and social.

A slightly different position toward the subject take the humanistic psychology representatives who interpret human identity in isolation from one's relationship with other people. Mental identity refers only to itself and own features. It is defined by Rogers (1959) as "a relatively stable and organized entirety of perception of own features and possibilities, along with their subjective evaluation (positive or negative), and with the emotional experiences that accompany self-perception" (Rogers, 1959, in Dziewiecki, 2000, p. 196). It is difficult to evaluate own capabilities without comparing them with other people and without any reference to a variety of social situations.

From the point of view of personalistic psychology, human identity is formed on the basis of the Ideal-I. A person aspires to transcending oneself on the basis of the values and aspirations meaningful for the human existence. It is considered that love unites man with the world and is a way to overcome own fear and loneliness (Dziewiecki, 2005). This way of understanding identity is characteristic for mature people; moreover, it demonstrates only one-sided point of view, and negates the possibility of identity formation through rebellion and opposition to the prevailing values. Erikson, the precursor of reflecting on identity, is a figure to whose ideas the contemporary theorists and researchers continue to refer. The author described the concept, more precisely defined as ego identity, as "the perception of sameness and continuity of the self despite the passage of time, and the feeling that the other people recognize personal unity and continuity of the individual" (Rękosiewicz, 2012, p. 19). With regard to the Erikson's definition quoted above, in 2006 K. Luyckx provided a definition of mature identity as "the result of exploration in depth and breadth, as well as undertaking the commitments and identifying with them" (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, 2006). This means that the individual is aware of both life tasks that appear at different stages of their life, and other obligations related to performing various roles in life (e.g. the role of a worker, mother etc.).

Young people during adolescence often use their position between childhood and independence to dispose of the responsibility for their actions in certain situations ("I am only a child"), while wanting be treated as adults in other ("I am almost an adult, I will not take orders from you").

Reaching mature identity must therefore be preceded by a few steps necessary for identity formation. It is necessary to test oneself in different roles in order to be able to reject those that do not fit one's own image. Popularly, the question of human identity is identical with the questions: Who am I? What am I like? The answers to the questions above are not obvious for a man during late adolescence stage and often force one to experiment in different areas of life in the search of oneself. When these areas are associated with the development of own interests, abilities or other socially acceptable activities, there are no major apprehensions. Some people during adolescence take a lot of effort to be able to continuously function well; unfortunately, some experiment in a manner endangering themselves and the public, in so doing looking for an easy way to deal with anxiety and new situation with the use of e.g. stimulants or "bad company."

James Marcia identified two stages of identity formation. The first one is called exploration, or exploration activities. At this stage, we have to deal with identity crisis. According to the author, the most intensive exploration takes place during early adolescence (12 to 15 years of age). The second step is making commitments, thus making choices from among the available alternatives, and seizing responsibility for own actions and their consequences, both the short and long-term (Rękosiewicz, 2012). The second stage, as defined by Luyckx, would be called mature identity. According to the author, it should be visible as soon as during late adolescence stage.

On the basis of my own experience in working with high school students, I believe that exploration phase undergoes extension, which consequently retards the entry into the next stage of identity formation. As a proof of this, comparative studies conducted in order to investigate the changes of self perception among the late stage adolescence population within the space of 15 years conducted by Renata Modrzejewska and Wanda Badura-Madej in 2008 can be mentioned (Modrzejewska, 2008). In fact, the results demonstrate that the adolescents of the 1960s (that is when Marcia's definition was presented), in comparison to the other groups of young people, manifested higher moral standards, a better level of emotional control, and consequently more satisfactory effects of coping with difficult situations. A similar position takes the creator of the emerging adulthood theory, Arnett, who points out that in comparison to the previous decades, in individualistic societies the exploration period became significantly extended. The results of the research conducted in Poland (Brzezińska, Piotrowski, 2010) and other countries (Luyckx et al., 2006) indicate that the decrease in intensity of exploration and making commitments occurs around 24–25 years of age (Brzezińska, Piotrowski, 2011).

## Dual Cycle of Identity Forming Model

While considering the way of understanding of the process of identity formation by Marcia and other theorists dealing with the issue of "identity," Luyckx et al. (2008) created a dual model of identity formation in which they precisely define

particular stages, and assign for them more specific categories. The model assumes that there are no rigidly defined boundaries between the two stages of identity, which was characteristic for Marcia's model. In the dual cycle model of identity formation both stages are fairly dependent on each other, and further intertwine throughout adolescence.

Exploration "in breadth" requires recognition of a wide range of possibilities, as well as a variety of areas of activity. Similarly to Marcia's concept, it is a stage of searching. Identity crisis at this stage is associated primarily with uncertainty and confusion which prevents or significantly hinders making choices regarding own future.

Exploration "in depth" refers to areas for which the individual has already made particular commitments. At this stage, the verification of whether they are consistent with one's capabilities, expectations, and perceptions occurs, therefore, the conviction of the rightness of the decisions made becomes confirmed. Otherwise, the whole cycle begins anew (Brzezińska, Piotrowski, 2010).

Furthermore, the authors introduced the concept of the ruminative exploration model, which means intensity of the individual's concerns and problems with obtaining satisfactory answers to the question "Who am I?." It is undeniably associated with experiencing negative emotions such as uncertainty, incompetence, and consequently reduced sense of quality of life and increased tension.

The individual may not be able to refrain from considering own future, anxieties connected with formation of their future life, and difficulties with clarification of their life goals (Piotrowski, 2010).

The research results of the authors' model indicate that exploration can be associated with both positive personality traits, for example scrupulousness, and those which may hinder satisfactory conduct of identity formation (Piotrowski, 2010). From the perspective of positive psychology, and more specifically the Character and Strength Virtues Theory by Seligman and Peterson, individual strength of the character can aid the process of identity formation, and those that are at a low level should be strengthened.

## Sense of Alienation

When coming back to Erikson's concept regarding identity formation during adolescence, another issue related to psychosocial crisis characteristic for this period emerges. It takes course on two levels; the first one can be described as a two poles conflict: group identity vs. alienation, while the second one as identity of the individual vs. the diffusion of roles.

In the literature, there can be found a number of concepts and theories dealing with the issue of alienation. However, it is understood in a twofold way: as a state/process independent from the subject's will (Marks), or as a belief/feeling. There also appears the distinction between objective alienation, in which alienation of economic, social and political institutions, and ideological formations can be



distinguished, and subjective alienation called auto-alienation (see also Schaff, 1999). It is also noted that alienation can be either situational or individualistic. In the first case, alienation may be the effect of isolation of the individual from the world, e.g. by placing them in prison or other totalitarian institution. Therefore, it can be understood as a temporary sense of alienation resulting from the body's response to inability of maintaining an appropriate relationship with the public due to external barriers. Nevertheless, the extended duration of stay in such conditions may cause an individualistic (chronic) sense of alienation which will then be treated as a dimension of personality (Kmieciak-Baran, 1995 by: Rokeach, 1960; McClosky, Schaar, 1965).

A disorder of the relationship between the individual and the society, characterized by, among many, a lack of understanding from others and the sense of loneliness, means that the individual perceives the environment as hostile, and feels unaided. The consequence, and sometimes the cause of this, is the lack of the notion of being in control. From among the existing theories regarding sense of alienation, from the point of view of my discussion the most accurate is Seeman's theory (1959) in which he draws attention to the complexity and diversity of the meanings of the term "alienation."

There are two basic ways to cope with alienation: a destructive and constructive one. According to Korzeniowski (1992), the means of responding to alienation depend primarily on the realization of own alienation. If a person is aware of this fact, they tend to choose a destructive way, for example desperation, a sense of purposelessness and other negative feelings directed toward oneself, rejection, or rebellion (directed against the social structure). Among the destructive methods addiction, crime, suicide, and creating communities of a destructive nature are also mentioned. If a person is not aware their own alienation, they do not perceive any alarming signs concerning their situation, so that they behave in a conformist manner. An individual can cope well with subjective feeling of alienation by the means of creativity, creation of a constructive community, or social activity.

The research conducted by the Laboratory of Social Innovation and Research "Stocznia" in September 2011 for Foundation "Dobra Sieć" indicate a number of benefits of voluntary services that allow the volunteers for self realization. The respondents emphasized that by being of assistance may provide more pleasure than mere taking. The benefits referred to can be divided into five categories: expanding horizons, being with others, changing the world for the better, the sense of appreciation, and the benefits of training. Among the specific benefits mentioned by volunteers, those that address the sense of anomie, including getting to know oneself and people alike, being useful, bringing joy to others, solving own problems, and a sense of relief can be distinguished.<sup>1</sup> Working in

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<sup>1</sup> „To jest wolontariat.” Raport z badania „Kodeks kluczowych wartości wolontariatu,” wrzesień 2011, [http://www.projektor.org.pl/uploads/184\\_1.pdf](http://www.projektor.org.pl/uploads/184_1.pdf) (accessed: 20.01.2014).



voluntary services allows the volunteers to pursue their goals with the assistance of other people and means, notice the meaning of the efforts and actions taken, and also strengthen the sense of belonging to a group which one identifies and works with. Therefore, it is a constructive way to deal with a sense of alienation. However, it appears that it refers rather to the unconscious sense of alienation, or is characteristic for people with internal control placement that are aware of their own shortcomings and intend to change the sense of dissatisfaction with oneself through action. Therefore, it is people mentally resistant being discussed.

According to some researchers, the commitment for the advantage of others only occurs when the individual has a hierarchy of values associated with the manifestations of social life, or if they see the benefits for themselves, e.g. the feeling of safety or belonging, or a personal gain. The pro-social activity is further dependent on the location of control, which determines the amount of effort undertaken by a person for a particular act, as well as perseverance in the pursuit of a determined goal with resistance to obstacles (Szmajke, 1983, by Kmieciak-Baran, 1995). The sense of alienation is the result of irregularities in the relationship between the individual and important areas of their life: people, internal beliefs, hierarchy of values, or standards. It is often accompanied by negative emotions that lead to undesirable behaviors, behavioral disorders, and other destructive ways of coping with this condition. From the psycho-pedagogical point of view, it is extremely important to support young people by the means of activities designed to make clear to them their own hierarchy of values and its relationship with the values and norms functioning in the society, strengthen their self-esteem, and teach them to take responsibility for their actions and predict the consequences.

## Resilience: The Importance of Psychological Resistance in Human Life

The researchers of both natural sciences and humanities assign a new meaning to the issue of resilience which has been a subject of a particular interest for the last three decades. Initially, the term was reserved exclusively for children and adolescents belonging to a higher risk group. However, recent studies point out to the universal nature of the concept, meaning that it can relate to majority of children, young people, and also adults. The Goldstein and Brooks's standpoint (2006) allows to confirm the thesis that every child has the ability to develop their mental resistance, and thus to acquire the ability to deal with stress that arises during difficult situations. Moreover, developing mental resistance helps to create self-acceptance and satisfying relationships with others, and to set clear and realistic goals in life (Pilecka, 2010). The aim of the researchers studying the phenomenon of mental resistance is to actively promote positive psychosocial development of the high-risk groups, and to find the best way to prevent psychopathology (Masten 2007; Luthar, Brown, 2007).

Previous research on the issue of resilience related to two main trends. The first one focused on searching for protective factors, making it possible to create a list of potential individual's resources that neutralize negative effects of the risk factors. Among these the female sex, positive qualities of temperament, skills and values, style of parental care promoting development of competence and self-esteem, support of others, or the so-called second chance can be distinguished (Werner, 1994; Jordan Institute for Families, 1996). The last of the factors mentioned is essential in working with socially maladjusted young people. The belief in the possibility of the pupil's behavior altered is the basis of starting rehabilitation; otherwise, the actions are pointless. Based on the assumption of positive psychology, it is possible to strengthen the individual's strong points which are also the protective factors. Instead of eliminating negative personality traits, is it worth teaching how to constructive deal with difficulties, and helping building hierarchy of values that is a measure of people's subsequent actions or behaviors.

In the Character Strength and Virtues Theory perspective, the individual's characteristics are at the same time the strengths of the character that everyone possesses, and what can be diverse is only a various degree of intensity. Positive psychology assumes, however, the possibility of strengthening human resistance resources through appropriate interactions.

Another field of research on the phenomenon of resilience is the idea of the practical use of theoretical assumptions; in other words, the implementation of measures aimed at strengthening psychological resilience of children and youth. The superior aim of the intervention is to improve mental health of people who grow up in unfavorable conditions, and to improve their adaptation in the society. In contrast to the activities carried out within the framework of the traditional prevention in which the main intention was to eliminate defects and minimizing risk factors, the impact based on the theory of resilience relates to boosting youth's resources and their protective factors. In the era of post-modernity when identity crisis affects nearly every teenager, it is worth making the projects aiming at developing appropriate hierarchy of values and teaching the importance of strong character features that can be used in a constructive way while coping with adolescence crisis.

The concept of resilience continues to become more and more popular in educational sciences, psychology, and biology. Although there is no clear definition of the terminology and intricacies of the concept, the goal seems to be clear to all the theorists and practitioners: desire to enhance the properties of the individual in order to facilitate their adaptation despite difficult life situations.

Paradoxically, social maladjustment may be a phenomenon of psychological resistance (Ungar, 2004). Juvenile behavior often becomes a way of coping with identity crisis, and the strengths of character, even when not accepted by the society, allow the youth for self realization and healthy adaptation despite traumatic experiences. It often occurs that in the deviant group they meet their basic needs such as a sense of belonging within a community they identify with.

## Conclusion

The developed theory of knowledge will provide a stimulating social development in dissemination of educational attitudes. It can also contribute to creating the appropriate method of minors rehabilitation, which in return will help reduce crime rates.

Understanding the nature of the forces that strengthen the individual's mental resistance allows for their objective measurement and continuous movement towards their strengthening. It is a search of psycho-educational and therapeutic means (Opora, 2010). The results of the research on psychological resistance manifest a significant share of components in the mechanisms maintaining stable health (Kaczmarek, Sęk, Ziarko, 2011). Adolescents are a special group for which mental resistance formation, awareness skills, and resources are different than in a case of adults who change the perception of themselves and the world with much more difficulty (yet it is still possible).

Drawing on from the ideas of positive psychology, it is possible to launch, and perhaps change the understanding of rehabilitation of young people and its effects, and to strengthen faith in people. The idea of transformation of thinking that can be inculcated in the new generation of socially maladjusted youth mentors is extremely important. It is not possible for effective rehabilitation without the conviction that actions have meaning.

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